



NEWS RELEASE

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Guide Dogs' Service to be Highlighted in L.A. Celebration

Blind Rower to Deliver 'Guide Dog Day' Keynote on the 'Power of Partnership'

SACRAMENTO – Aerial Gilbert, a world-class rower, former registered nurse and outreach manager for the Guide Dogs for the Blind school, will be the keynote speaker for Guide Dog Day, an annual event highlighting the important contributions these service animals make in the lives of the visually impaired.

Guide Dog Day will be held November 18 in Los Angeles and will feature presentations by representatives of California's three guide dog training schools and organizations of the blind and culminate in a meeting of the State Board of Guide Dogs for the Blind, which licenses guide dog schools and trainers. Also in attendance will be a number of guide dog users, trainers and, of course, the dogs themselves.

"We hope that Guide Dog Day will highlight just how important guide dogs are in our society, and how important the Board's main mission — consumer protection — is to the people who use these animals to help them live their lives to the fullest," said Antonette Sorrick, executive officer of the Board.

Ms. Gilbert, the outreach coordinator for the Guide Dogs for the Blind school in San Rafael, is a perfect example of living life to the fullest. Her accomplishments are remarkable by any standard, but perhaps more so because she herself is blind. A registered nurse, Ms. Gilbert lost her sight in adulthood in a 1989 incident when she used over-the-counter eyedrops that had been laced with lye.

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The loss of her sight was traumatic. But six weeks later, a friend suggested she once again take up rowing, a sport she had participated in during her college years.

Ms. Gilbert remembered the feeling in an article published on the Web site, Concept 2 Rowing.

“Muscle memory took over and, for the first time since the accident, this was the only thing I felt competent at doing,” she recalled. “On the water, it was as though I could see again. There were no barriers or obstacles to moving freely.”

The rekindling of her passion for her old sport proved fateful. Ms. Gilbert has gone on to become a champion adaptive rower, earning a spot on the U.S. Adaptive Rowing Team winning medals in several competitions all over the world. Most recently, she participated in the 2007 World Rowing Championships in Munich, Germany, a qualifying event for the 2008 Adaptive Olympics in Beijing where rowing was offered for the first time. She has also become a great promoter of the sport itself among people with disabilities.

Meanwhile, Ms. Gilbert decided to take another fateful step: acquiring a guide dog. She has owned several over the years, and now partners with a German Shepherd named, appropriately enough, “Splash.”

Ms. Gilbert’s talk will dovetail perfectly with this year’s Guide Dog Day theme, “Harnessing the Power of Partnership.” It is a lesson that she says she has experienced firsthand, both as an athlete on a rowing team and as the human half of a guide dog team.

“We all value our independence,” Ms. Gilbert says. “ but I’ve found that we can make some of our greatest strides when we work together.”

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